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ABSTRACT

The Chinese university students who protested in Spring 1989 were concerned about inflation, shortages of goods and services, and pay inequities. They disliked corruption, bribery, and unfair favoritism, and wanted more press freedom and more independence for their student organizations. Most of all, they wanted more dialogue with aging leaders about their role in China's future. Low-paid or jobless city dwellers felt a common cause with protesting students. Farmers, who were far removed, adopted a wait-and-see attitude toward student protests. The leadership was split. Deng Xiaoping, outraged by the protests and alarmed that further unrest would wreck economic advances, wanted student protests crushed. Moderates, preferring reconciliation with students, were headed by Zhao Ziyang, who counseled against violent suppression. On May 17, Deng won the Politburo Standing Committee vote for military suppression, and the students were bloodily evicted from the square on June 4. Fall 1989 university enrollments nationwide were cut 5 percent. All students had to attend political re-education classes. Faculty at Beijing University and elsewhere had to attend Communist political study sessions. The clash and the military put-down discredited the Party in student minds and hearts. The hopes that impelled intellectuals to support Communism were shattered. The urban population at least is disillusioned. Farmers, slower to change, will likely side ultimately with urban intellectuals moving toward democracy. (JB)

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China's Student Protest 1989

By Franklin and Betty Parker

Behind Protests

Reasons why Chinese university students protested in spring 1989 and were brutally put down by government troops can be understood by remembering that China is an advancing but still a third world country. It cannot afford compulsory education, adequate school buildings, and well trained teachers. By ability, luck, and pluck, university students were winnowed from an educational system only recently able to afford elementary school places for nearly all 6 to 12-year-olds. About 75 percent of urban and 50 percent of rural elementary school leavers find a place in junior high schools (ages 12-15). Of these, perhaps 50 percent of urban and 25 percent of rural students can enter senior high school (ages 15-18). Thus, university students, representing one out of hundreds of their age group, react strongly and negatively to government leaders who will not listen to their views.

China's Importance

Sheer numbers make China important. It is the world's most populous country, with over one billion people, or one out of every four persons on earth. China is also a Communist country with nuclear bomb capability. Also, it began economic reform some years before Gorbachev's USSR-style openness and economic restructuring. Supreme leader Deng Xiaoping's slogan, "To get rich is beautiful," said yes to economic reform. His crackdown on student protesters in June 1989 said no to political reform.

Something of China's background must precede such questions as who won, who lost, in China's crackdown on political reform? What will happen when the old octogenerian leaders die out?

Background Picture

For some 3,000 years dynastic emperors ruled China, which called itself the "Middle Kingdom" (main country) between heaven and earth. China's Confucian philosophy of orderliness, responsibility, and obligation within and among extended families, up through civil servants, to the emperor, created an inward-looking, self-satisfied society. China missed the leavening effects of Europe's Renaissance, Reformation, and Industrial Revolution. It was too weak to resist 19th century Western penetration by missionaries and "foreign-devil" traders, who lived European-style in port cities under their own Western laws. A Shanghai park sign read: "No Chinese or dogs allowed."

China lost the Opium Wars with the West (1839-42, 1858-60), lost the Sino-Japanese War (1894-95), lost the anti-foreigner Boxer Rebellion, was humiliated by forced payment of indemnities, and was weakened by warlords. After the 1911 revolution, China attempted to form a republican government under Sun Yatsen, who said: "China is an open dish, fit to be carved up and eaten by foreigners." Seeking but not finding help from abroad except from the USSR, he allied himself with the tiny Chinese Communist Party (founded 1921). His successor, Chiang Kaishek, fought the Communists in a civil war more than he fought the invading Japanese, 1931-45. Encircled and bombed by Chiang, the Communists, on their Long March, in the ensuing civil war, and in the war with Japan, won the loyalty of peasant millions. They forced Chiang's flight to Taiwan. On October 1, 1949, emergent leader Mao Zedong said, "China has stood up," thus declaring the ascendancy of a Communist People's Republic of China.

Two development policies clashed: red (Mao) vs. expert (Deng). Mao believed that ideology could motivate people to work miracles. But his industrial Great Leap Forward (1958-60) failed. His Cultural Revolution (1966-76) also failed. It was a last-ditch effort, through students organized in rampaging Red Guard units, to oust "capitalist roader" experts like Deng. Deng, believing in educating and rewarding talent, fostered economic reform in the 1980s, introduced modified free enterprise, a market economy, "key schools" (enriched programs and better teachers) in already developing economic areas, and an educational TV network.

May-June 1989 Events

May 4 is, historically, student protest day, going back to May 4, 1919, when student protesters helped initiate a modernization movement. May 4, 1979, saw the "democracy wall" movement, the first post-Mao democratization effort. May 4, 1986, student protests spilled over to May 4, 1987, and were only mildly suppressed when the then reform-minded Party General Secretary Hu Yaobang sided with students. This sympathy lost him his post. He died of a heart attack April 15, 1989. Although protesting students carried pictures of him, their march after his death really expressed disapproval of Deng for not listening to intellectuals' demands for political reform to match economic reform. To coincide with Gorbachev's Beijing visit May 15-18 and attendant worldwide TV coverage, some 300 students began a hunger strike. In sympathy, on May 17, over a million people flooded Tiananmen Square and roads leading to it. At midnight, May 19, after Gorbachev left for Shanghai, the wavering government declared martial law. Unarmed troops in trucks were sent to the square. Students and sympathizers put up bicycles and buses as road blocks. Students from outside Beijing outnumbered Beijing students. May 20-June 2 were emotional, roller coaster days. Neighborhood people sided with the students. On May 26 the 30-foot Goddess of Democracy was

erected, giving protesters a new focus and new energy. On June 2 the government sent in tanks and new troops armed with guns, tear gas, and truncheons. On June 4 they opened fire. Many were injured and killed: students, bystanders, and soldiers. Hospitals overflowed.

Motives

Students, liking economic reform, were concerned about inflation, shortages of goods and services, and pay inequities (farmers, able to market products, were making more money than urban workers). Students disliked corruption, bribery, and unfair favoritism. They wanted more press freedom, more independence for their student organizations. Most of all, they wanted more dialogue with aging leaders about their role in China's future. Low-paid or jobless city dwellers felt a common cause with protesting students. Farmers (China is 85 percent agrarian) were far removed, suspicious of intellectuals and "city slickers," knew that their children had less chance at schooling, particularly in mainly urban key schools, and adopted a wait and see attitute about student protests.

The leadership was split. Deng, outraged by the protests and alarmed that further unrest would wreck economic advances, wanted student protests crushed. Moderates, preferring reconciliation with students, were headed by Zhao Ziyang, Hu Yaobang's successor as party general secretary. He counseled against violent suppression and visited hunger striking students in the square. With Gorbachev in Beijing, TV cameras gained world sympathy for the student hunger strikers. It became obvious to Deng that students and supporters had taken over the square and the capital. The image was unforgettably etched on world TV of a lone protester defiantly standing off tanks. Deng, furious, on May 17, won the Politburo Standing Committee vote for military suppression. Moderates had lost. Zhao was fired and retired. June 4 saw the end as students and supporters were bloodily evicted from the square. The military was in

command. The old leaders had won the battle. Who won the longer war?

Retribution in Universities

Fall 1989 university enrolments nationwide were cut 5 percent. All students had to attend political re-education classes. In August all college freshmen were to undergo full-time military training for a few weeks. At Beijing University a full year of military training was contemplated. One plan was that college graduates applying to graduate school must first do farm or factory work for one to two years. Some wondered if these measures would be implemented by a lethargic bureaucracy.

Beijing University intake, which was 2,000 in 1988, was reduced to 800 in 1989. New enrollment was closed in its departments of history, philosophy, international relations, and public relations--from which many pro-democracy leaders had come. Faculty at Beijing University and elsewhere had to attend Communist political study sessions, as did the students.

The Bigger Picture

A freer economy and profit motive, initiated by Deng in1978, two years after Mao's death (1976), together with educational expansion and more students studying abroad, opened the door to ideas about political democracy. More foreign contact and particularly TV exposure made students and intellectuals painfully aware that they lagged behind the West and Japan in consumer goods and in democracy.

Student protests, which would have occurred anyway on May 4 in a minor key, were made larger by inflation, shortages of goods and services, income inequities, and the irritation of corruption and favoritism. Differentiation--greater rewards to some than to others, the consequences of economic reform--bothered students. Mostly they were piqued to protest by aged leaders who would not allow a freer press nor

heed student and intellectual opinion about making China's future better. The clash and the military putdown which the world saw discredited the Party in student minds and hearts. The hopes that impelled intellectuals to support Communism were shattered. The urban population at least is disillusioned. No democratic institutions or legal documents exist to assure a peaceful transition to freedom.

Rural China, where 85 percent of the people live and where many farmers have recently prospered, tends to favor the status quo. But rural people also feel keenly about their children who, because of population pressure and desire for opportunity, drift to the cities. There, with less education and less chance than urban children at key schools, they fall behind. These farmers, slower to change, will likely side ultimately with urban intellectuals in moving toward democracy. China's history and its people's patience are long. As the pace of change quickens, more student protests are likely, and the pressure for democracy will grow.